DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 831 HE 010 165

AUTHOR Eddy, Margot Sanders
TITLE Part-Time Students.
INSTITUTION American Association for Higher Education, Washington, D.C.; ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (DHEW), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE Jun 78
NOTE 5p.; Marginally legible due to small print
AVAILABLE FROM Publications Department, American Association for Higher Education, Suite 780, One Dupont Circle, Washington, D.C. 20036 ($0.40)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Organization; Ancillary Services; *College Students; Continuous Learning; Declining Enrollment; *Educational Change; Educational Economics; Educational Finance; Educational Policy; Educational Programs; Futures (of Society); *Higher Education; Literature Reviews; *Nontraditional Students; *Part Time Students; Policy Formation; Student Characteristics; *Student College Relationship; Student Needs; Student Personnel Services; Student Recruitment; Teaching Techniques
IDENTIFIERS Information Analysis Products

ABSTRACT

In recent years changes in the constituency of higher education have been characterized by a substantial increase in the number of students attending college less than full-time. As a consequence the once sharp distinctions between youth and adult students, campus and extension education, and traditional and nontraditional clients are giving way to recognition of greater heterogeneity in student populations. The growth in the number of part-time students has been advantageous in a time of declining full-time enrollments. At the same time, the trend has caused concern and some changes in several areas of higher education, including institutional finance, student recruitment, academic programs, teaching, support services, and student participation in campus activities. As a result, policies for this new majority in higher education will be shaped in the forseeable future by very different and more changeable social and educational priorities, requiring much more flexibility in higher education, even from year to year. (Author/MSE)

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American Association for Higher Education
June 1978

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PART-TIME STUDENTS

Margot Sanders Eddy

In recent years, changes in the constituency of higher education have caused greater interest in part-time students. The primary reason for this is the increase in the number of students attending college less than full-time. As a consequence the once sharp distinctions between youth and adult students, campus and extension education, and traditional and nontraditional clients are giving way to recognition of greater heterogeneity in student populations (Furniss 1975; Carnegie Commission 1971a; Frandson 1976; Parker 1975).

The growth in numbers of part-time college students has been advantageous in a time of declining full-time enrollments. At the same time, the trend has caused concern and some changes in several areas of higher education, including institutional finance, student recruitment, academic programs, teaching, support services, and student participation in campus activities.

Enrollment Trends

The growth of part-time enrollments is well documented. During the period 1969-72, the number of full-time students in postsecondary education grew by 8.8 percent, while the number of part-time students grew by 20.4 percent, or well over twice as much; in collegiate institutions the part-time student increase occurred 3.5 times as fast as in all of postsecondary education, since part-time enrollment in noncollegiate institutions was already somewhat higher (Morstain and Smart 1977, p. 666; Pitchell 1974, p. 3). Similarly, during 1969-74, the full-time equivalent enrollments of part-time students in state colleges and universities grew by almost half in the midwestern and southern regions of the United States (Stampen 1976, p. 3). By 1972 part-time students were a distinct majority in all of postsecondary education at 57.5 percent, and approached a majority even in collegiate institutions (Pitchell 1974, p. 3). During the period 1972-74 the full-time student growth was down to about 5 percent, but the growth in part-time students was still four times that amount.

In 1974-78 the growth trend has continued, although unevenly. Recent overall gains in higher education enrollment since the early 1970's have been attributed in substantial part to increase in part-time student enrollment (Schultz 1976, p. 2). Even though part-time enrollment in 1976-77 contradicted the growth trend by dropping slightly in four-year schools, it still gained somewhat in two-year colleges and this growth was still greater than that of full-time enrollment (Parker 1977, pp. 3, 9). Figures for the 1977-78 academic year show a slight increase in part-time student enrollments in four-year colleges and universities, reversing the previous year's decline but leaving part-time enrollments at about the 1975-76 level (Parker 1978, p. 7).

A variety of trends has emerged in the distribution of these part-time enrollments. First, in recent years women have been enrolling as part-time students at a greater rate than men and now constitute 52 percent of these enrollments (Magarrell 1978). In 1974 the ratio of female to male part-time students in two-year colleges was 1.57 to one. Second, veterans as a group, almost half of whom used to be part-time enrollees, now show a steady enrollment decline. Third, the largest number of part-time students is in degree-credit courses, but most of these students are in lower-division courses. Of this group, more of the first-time part-time students are women than men, whereas more of the full-time first-timers are men (Wade 1977, pp. 5, 390). Fourth, in 1975, the mean undergraduate degree-credit course load for part-time students was less than half-time, figured on the basis of individual institutions' full-time-equivalences (Wade 1977, p. 294). Fifth, recent figures show the greatest part-time student growth in public two-year institutions and public universities; private four-year institutions other than universities show a rate of part-time student growth less than that of full-time enrollment, the only category in which this occurs, which represents a declining growth rate in that type of institution (Wade, Pollock, and Rouselle 1977, p. 10). However, these statistics may be slightly deceptive since many senior citizens—formerly counted separately as "persons served" by colleges—are now counted as part-time students, whether for uniformity of records or for funding purposes (Lombardi 1975, pp. 24-25).

In graduate study numerical and proportionate increases have occurred in part-time enrollment, and a more rapid increase for women than men parallels the trend in undergraduate enrollment. Further, this trend is strengthened by indications that part-time graduate students are currently interested in staying in graduate school slightly longer (Baker 1977, p. 3); the implication here is that the institutions that can accommodate part-time students stand the best chance of increasing their enrollments for master's and doctor's degrees.

It is clear, then, that growth in part-time enrollments is a significant trend in higher education. Exactly how much, how fast, and how long is less clear. It is commonly understood that the number of individuals in the United States of traditional college age will de-

Research Currents is prepared by the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, The George Washington University, Washington, D.C. The material in this publication was prepared pursuant to a contract with the National Institute of Education, U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Contractors undertaking such projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their judgment in professional and technical matters. Prior to publication, the manuscript was submitted to the American Association for Higher Education for critical review and determination of professional competence. This publication has met such standards. Points of view or opinion, however, do not necessarily represent the official view of opinions of either AAHE or the National Institute of Education.

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HE010165

Margot Sanders Eddy is a research assistant at the ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education.

cline steadily into the early 1990's (Henderson 1977, pp. 11-13; Mingle 1976, p. 3; Glenny 1975, p. 4). However, some researchers predict that growth in part-time enrollments in the next two to six years will continue at a rate similar to that of recent years (Morstain and Smart 1977, p. 666; Lombardi 1975, p. 25).

Some Reasons for the Trends

The reasons for the current growth are varied and seem to be closely related to the changing aspirations, finances, and characteristics of part-time students and of the undergraduate population in general. The value placed on a college education has changed. It is speculated that some individuals, not able to afford full-time enrollment, are enrolling part-time as an alternative (Furniss 1975, p. 16), but this has been disputed. Many of these students may simply lose all college aspiration.

In practice, it seems higher education no longer serves "primarily as a means of preparation for maturity," but accommodates lifelong educational needs as people perceive them: career advancement, career change, or personal fulfillment (Spear 1976, pp. 39-40). According to Furniss (1975, p. 18), participation in higher education is now less dependent on social forces alone than on the individual's estimate of the attractiveness of alternatives at the time he makes a decision about pursuing his education.

For those who do decide to enroll in higher education, economic factors may be important in shaping attitudes toward part-time enrollment. There seems to be a nationwide close-to-home trend in college attendance, and new part-time students especially are local in their movements (Stampen 1976, p. 3; Furniss 1975, p. 18). Studies show that these students, regardless of age, generally combine their educational pursuits with employment (Schultz 1976, p. 2; Branan 1976, p. 49). However, it is not clear what the net effect of economic factors is. When people are unsure about the direction of the economy they may either still wish to enroll in college, as Furniss implies, or they may defer or reject further education, as Stampen suggests. Similarly, as the economy improves two things could happen: those in school because they lack work could leave school, and those out of school for lack of adequate finances could return or begin to attend (Furniss 1975, p. 18).

However, the motivations of part-time students are various and economics is only one factor. Pitchell (1974, pp. 4-5) identifies four categories of the part-time student: one who is similar to the traditional group of full-time students; a second having job incentives or requirements as a major reason for enrolling; a third in employer-sponsored programs; and a fourth having been recruited for federal categorical problem-solving programs such as law encorcement education, drug abuse education, and training in the sciences. Morstain and Smart (1977, pp. 671-76) have developed statistically a motivational typology with five categories of adult learners: nondirectional, social, stimulation-seeking, career-oriented, and life-change. Different institutional types, they say, will have different mixes of motivational types, and each type implies a different kind of institutional action.

Institutional Perspectives

Just as financial considerations are a factor in student motivation to enroll part-time, the economic returns of that enrollment are of concern to institutions, especially as the proportion of part- to full-time students rises. Most existing funding formulas for publicly-supported institutions are based on the full-time equivalence (FTE) of student enrollments. This method does not always compensate for other relevant factors, and increased part-time student numbers don't necessarily translate into high FTE's for funding increases. Standard FTE formulas may equate two or three part-time students with one full-time student, but when the average part-time student enrolled half-time or more the FTE funding may not match the institution's total credit-hour enrollment and institutional costs.

On the other hand, the student headcount may not accurately reflect the impact of part-time enrollments on the number of courses offered, production of degrees, cost of services, or financing pattern. Despite efforts to provide the same services to all students, financial constraints may limit the services available to part-time enrollees (Lombardi 1975, p. 2; Glenny 1975, pp. 2, 6; Mangham 1975, p. 6). Glenny feels that the negative economic effects of the part-time enrollment trend may be greater for public than private institutions, since the proportion of part-time students is growing fastest there and since a larger portion of private institutions' income is in forms not contingent upon enrollments: grants, gifts, and endowments. However, recent national figures show that private institutions depend on tuition and fees for a larger portion of their total income than do publicly controlled colleges and universities (Mertins 1977, pp. 6-7), so the part-time enrollment issue is crucial to both public and private institutions.

In spite of these concerns, and in response to general educational market trends, colleges and universities are making a greater effort to expand their client group. This effort is called marketing, recruitment, or audience development, and includes a variety of activities ranging from increasing college visibility and active recruitment to substantial curriculum and service changes. For visibility some colleges are using newspaper, radio and television advertising, mailings, special brochures, and talks to civic groups. However, little special attention has been given to college catalogs as a recruitment tool (Kegel 1977, pp. 5-7).

Beyond the increased need among colleges and universities for visibility, more substantial changes are occuring in the areas of curriculum and nonacademic services. These curricular and service changes are often related to each other and to existing demand as much as to anticipated demand. They include short or mini-courses, satellite campuses, relaxed admissions standards, educational brokerage, special programming funds for academic departments, assumption of new functions (such as literacy education, recreational and custodial responsibilities for the elderly, and drug addiction and alcoholism counseling), resident programs, increased independent study, modular courses, increased use of instructional technology, expanded evening divisions, changes in service hours, expanded financial aid, special facilities, and more non-campus colleges (Lombardi 1977, p. 37; Carnegie Commission 1971a, p. 43; Walker 1976, p. 41; Lombardi 1975, pp. 3, 24-5).

An example of a combined curriculum and marketing effort is a unique program developed independently by a management consultant and "sold" to Adelphi University, which has awarded an M.B.A. to businessmen after completion of courses conducted on commuter trains. Many of these businessmen-students have previously dropped out of graduate programs, and some have considered returning as full-time students as a result of the Adelphi classes (Levy 1976, pp. 25-7).

Institutional Responsibility

The growing interest throughout higher education in attracting and serving part-time students has stimulated discussion of where the responsibility lies for their programs and services. Part-time students are commonly referred to as continuing education or adult students, regardless of individual program or age. Frandson (1976, p. 43) notes an incipient movement to take the part-time phenomenon "from the hands that built it"—that is, from extension

schools—when academe had previously only given part-time students its "leftovers" of time and money; he feels that this source of income and influence more properly belongs with the continuing education division. However, much of the related discussion among extension educators concerns the dynamics of centralizing responsibility rather than leaving it fragmented between extension and academic divisions (Knox 1975 and 1976; Frandson 1976; Schram 1976). The emphasis in such centralization is placed on the potential unique to each kind of institution (two-year, four-year, or university, public or private) and to the academic and extension sectors. There is the promise for cooperation between these sectors, with the former providing academic specialization and the latter providing insight and experience in shaping educational services for a nontraditional student population. Schram (1976, p. 4) suggests that such an arrangement would warrant two things: designation of an assistant or associate dean for extension or continuing education within each academic division of the institution, and training department faculty in new forms of programming. In California's New College (University of California 1971) the role of university faculty is seen as central to the success of a systemwide part-time student program; Patton (1975, pp. 433-41) discusses the incentives and disincentives for both the teaching unit and the individual faculty member in participating in such a program. The obvious advantages include employment for faculty member, contact with a new student group (as a source of stimulation, satisfaction, and potential full-time students), and the counterbalance to the traditional faculty research orientation. Some faculty also perceive the part-time student as a largely ignored client, and therefore support the concept of special institutional programs. Additionally, when the faculty member's participation is predicated on his reputation for good teaching, there is an element of prestige present. The disincentives include some faculty opposition, fear of downgrading existing programs, fear of increased teaching loads and changes in lifestyle, possible loss of program continuity, and concern about the quality of the students.

The need for change in the nonacademic services of higher education has also become apparent. Historically the tendency has been to think of services for full-time students as more easily planned and less subject to variation (Furniss 1975, p. 16; Carnegie Commission 1971b, p. 112), but the change in the student population has created new needs and underscored old ones. Of primary concern are the areas of student financial aid, institutional accessibility, and the matter of student participation in campus life.

A double standard has been recognized in financial aid for full- and part-time enrollees (Carnegie Commission 1971b, p. 112; Kegel 1977, p. 16; Mangham 1975, p. 2; Pitchell 1974, pp. 7-8), and new scholarship programs are being established to overcome what may be one of the last large barriers to college attendance (Kegel 1975; Sims 1976, pp. 9-12). Pitchell (1974, p. 6) speculates that if financial aid had been more readily available to part-time students, many of the important federal problem-solving programs would not be necessary but would have come into being as regular programs funded by tuition income. There has also been some discussion of tuition rates as a form of discrimination against part-time students; many institutions and states have flat-rate tuitions and not rates based on the individual student's credit-hour load (Southern Regional Education Board 1976, pp. 3-4; Pitchell 1974, pp. 10-11).

Matters of institutional accessibility to part-time students cover a broad area, and include information services, registration, access to records, office and library hours, counseling and advising, child care, and placement services. Kegel's survey (1977) of two-year colleges reveals that although some schools extend some of these services to part-time students and students attending classes at night, accessibility is still far from being universal for the changing student population. The question arises of whether or not the institution "owes" these services to the part-time enrollees, who were once thought of as "irregulars" on campus but who now may pay a disproportionate amount of tuition (Thain 1976, p. 45). Chalick (1974) found that in some institutions student participation in campus activities such as athletics, student government, and governance is limited by enrollment status.

Conclusion

The question concerning the special needs of the growing part-time student population and the changing needs of the institutions and faculty serving it are far from fully answered. For the most part these students are still regarded as traditional students having a lighter course load, when in reality they are older, busier, and facing real barriers to obtaining further education. In matters of student and institutional finance, academic programs, and non-academic services, colleges and universities will have to commit their energies and real resources to educating students on terms very different from those now assumed. The first and largest step, however, is for institutions and government agencies to recognize that the audience for higher education will never again be the relatively homogeneous cohort of 18-year-olds, but is now the entire population and the educational interest of this population has been greatly underestimated. For the institutions this implies not only modifying curricula and providing more financial assistance, but also restructuring institutional schedules to fit the students' requirements rather than the employees', including these more mature students in governance processes, and further research on the ways in which part-time students differ from their traditional, full-time counterparts. Some of this research should focus on the students' cognitive and affective development and on the ways in which they are perceived by employers and peers. Policies for this new majority will be shaped in the foreseeable future by very different and more changeable social and educational priorities, requiring much more flexibility in higher education, even from year to year.

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